DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 319 084 CS 507 158

AUTHOR Olson, Scott R.
TITLE Reading Meta-Television: A New Model for Reader-Response Criticism.
PUB DATE 31 Oct 89
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association (40th, Dublin, Ireland, June 24-29, 1990). Tables are in small print and may not reproduce legibly.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Audience Analysis; *Critical Viewing; Mass Media Role; *Models; *Popular Culture; Programing (Broadcast); *Reader Response; Receptive Language; Symbolism; Television Research; *Television Viewing
IDENTIFIERS Intertextuality; Metatelevision; *Television Criticism

ABSTRACT

Many current models of television viewing regard viewers either as passive receptors, active participants, or addled dupes. A study proposed a more flexible model for television viewing research. The study used the television program "St. Elsewhere," an example of "meta-television" (television programming which contains hidden references to song lyrics, movies, television, and other elements of popular culture). Thirty-seven subjects were given a questionnaire which asked about television viewing habits, familiarity with "St. Elsewhere" and other programs, and attitudes toward television viewing. Respondents then watched "St. Elsewhere's" final episode, "The Fat Lady Sings," which was full of hidden references. While 72% of respondents reported liking the show and 69% disagreed with the assertion that "this show confused me," many were unaware of the hidden references. Each viewer perceived the show somewhat differently, in a process of reception that was found to be difficult, even impossible, to articulate. Further methodological testing of the "reception theory" hypothesis is required, including larger samples and more accurately cross-referenced data on television viewing patterns, personal habits, and the kinds of responses they elicit. (Five tables of data are included; 18 references are attached.) (SG)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED319084

READING META-TELEVISION:

A New Model for Reader-Response Criticism

A paper submitted to

International Communication Association

1990 International Conference

Dublin, Ireland

by

Scott R. Olson

Associate Professor

Department of Communication

Central Connecticut State University

New Britain, CT 06051 U.S.A

(203) 827-7840

October 31, 1989

CS507158

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

SCOTT R. OLSON

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Reading Meta-television: A New Model for Reader-Response Criticism

Current models of television viewing are in many cases mutually exclusive at the same time they are descriptive of particular watching responses. Television viewers are regarded as passive receptors, active participants, or addled dupes depending on what type of study is being done. Surely, the television audience is all of these and more; particular viewers might be each at different times. The study of television needs a flexible model of how it is watched. Such a model is suggested by the text of the last episode of St. Elsewhere, "The Fat Lady Sings," and by the variety of readings that it elicits. A comparison of the text and the responses it generates shows it to be homologous with the way that it is watched.

The study of how media are consumed by their audiences is a growing area of criticism. Reader-response criticism and Reception Theory have a natural home in the study of television, in part because television texts, as popular entertainment, beg to be defined by the manner in which they are viewed. Unfortunately, much of the analysis of reader-response to television has not actually involved popular readers but rather the conjecture of the critic. The work consequently tends to be theoretical, generally an appropriate condition for so new an approach, but it is time for these theoretical speculations to be moved into the arena for actual reader-responses.

Reception Theory and Reader-Response Criticism, the former a critical approach and the latter a German theoretical one,[1] are unique among literary approaches to the media in that theory can actually be experimented upon to some extent: a critical conjecture may be compared to actual readings by non-critics. Such a technique has been seldom attempted, however. One significant exception is Ien Ang's Watching Dallas (1985). Ang solicited reader-responses to this prime-time soap opera by advertising for letters from European viewers. While the results showed a fascinating diversity and complexity of readings, Ang's work suffers from an uncontrolled methodology: the specific episodes viewed, the viewing conditions, and the areas of critique the respondents chose to make were all random. While Watching Dallas is a pioneering work in many ways, a more sophisticated approach to reader-responses would expose the audience to a uniform text and viewing condition, then explore the variety of specific responses compared with self-reported viewing habits, favorite programs, and other demographic data. This slightly more methodological approach comes close to Northrop Frye's (1971) not-yet-realized dream for scientific criticism and the "assumption of total coherence" (p. 16).

Choosing an appropriate text for such an approach is a bit problematic. The text needs to be sufficiently complicated to elicit a variety of responses from the audience; at the same time, it needs to be perceived as popular entertainment to seem inclusive for most of the audience. These strictures consequently leave out shows like Three's Company (might be perceived as too unsophisticated by part of the audience) and The Singing Detective (might be perceived as too sophisticated).

One suitable type of programming for this purpose is meta-television, television that is intertextual or self-reflexive (Olson, 1987). Its suitability is generated from the way in which its sophistication is hidden like a game within the text for gnostic postmodernists to

---

[1]Reception Theory derives from the German idealism of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1986) and finds its fruition in the aesthetics of Jauss (1982) and the implied-reader implied-author approach of Iser (1980).

ferret out; viewers unfamiliar with particular references may not detect that the text is operating at a level higher than their comprehension. The ability to recognize the multiple levels of the text are conditioned by the familiarity of each viewer with the program in particular and television and reading in general.

St. Elsewhere is a good choice for such a study of reader-responses because it is metafictional in some ways and conventional in others. It can be easily categorized as "another hospital show" by casual viewers, while careful and regular viewers hunt for hidden song lyrics, movie and television characters, and references to St. Elsewhere itself (see, for example, Barker, 1989). The concluding episode of the five-year series, "The Fat Lady Sings," engenders all of these as it brought closure to the series; it was an ideal choice for soliciting reader-responses. The closure that this episode brings also seems to refer to the way that the audience is watching it, and the responses that this study generated indicate that the television show St. Elsewhere becomes homologous for the manner in which it is watched.

After discussing current, competing models of reading, explaining the data gathering method used to solicit reader-responses, and describing elements of the episode of St. Elsewhere in question, this paper will describe the response of the "normative viewer," a composite "imaginary reader" assembled from the median reactions to the show, and discuss how individual viewers differed from the norm. The paper concludes with an examination of how the model of perception posited by the epilogue in "The Fat Lady Sings" parallels the diversity of responses to it.

Models of Reading

The models of the mass media audience through which theorists and researchers currently operate may be roughly divided into three categories based on their chronological appearance in the literature; maintaining the medical metaphor of media response that it will

be seen is proposed by St. Elsewhere, these three models can be nicknamed "viewers as patients," "viewers as physicians," and "viewers as junkies."

"Patients" describes the earliest model of reception, one that can be attributed to Lasswell (1927). This view of television, which remains perhaps the dominant one in the popular press and in some psychological and sociological effects studies, assumes the television viewer to be passively receptive. Television viewing is considered to be a somewhat inferior mode of reception, so television viewers are considered to be anti-intellectual and media illiterate, unaware of the effect that the media have on them. The term "patients" is derived for the hospital metaphor here from the "hypodermic needle" theory, an approach to mass media that assumed that a message either was or was not received and acted upon, much like an injection for a virus. Although criticism of this approach began as early as Katz and Lazarsfeld (1954), its effect on popular and scholarly conceptualizations of media is persistent and pervasive.

"Physicians" refers to Fiske and Hartley's (1978) approach to television viewing. Their use of the term "readers" as a way to portray television viewers as intelligent and active rather than unintelligent and passive consumers of the media parallels the knowledge and control of a medical doctor, including the ability to recognize and diagnose one's own illness. For Fiske and Hartley, the viewer is interactive, attentive, and capable of reading subtleties in a television text. This approach has gained wide acceptance among media scholars, particularly those doing work in popular culture and reader-response. It is limited to some extent, though, because it discusses the responses of highly literate media consumers.

"Junkies" is descriptive of the post-modernist view of television consumption. Here, television viewers are essentially out-of-control and addicted in their use of the medium, which has created for them an artificial world similar to the world created by hallucinogenic drugs. Avant-garde philosophers and American sociologists have joined to forge this view of the television audience. Baudrillard (1983), for example, calls the environment created

by the media a "hyperreality"; Sol Yurick (1985) calls it "metatron" meta-environment; and Joshua Meyrowitz documents how television-addicted Americans have "no sense of place" (1985). One problem with this approach is its inherent lack of utility for literary criticism of television: the thesis itself renders criticism meaningless. It also suffers from the opposite syndrome that affects Hartley and Fiske: for Baudrillard and Yurick, media primarily act upon its audience whereas for Fiske and Hartley the audience acts upon the media. Clearly, both are true.

It can be seen, then, these models of reception are not altogether satisfactory when confronting the diversity of responses that the audience has for television, particularly for complicated metafictional texts which can act upon some viewers while being acted upon by others. Due to a multiplicity of factors perhaps too numerous to ever catalogue, a web of multistep influences reminiscent of Klapper (1960), the television audience is simultaneously constituted of patients, doctors, and junkies; indeed, every viewer can be each of these at different times. There needs to be a more encompassing model of media consumption.

Method

Anonymous subjects (N=37) were first given a questionnaire which inquired into their television viewing habits: the amount of exposure to television they have had (both as a child and now, self-reported); the level of their familiarity with St. Elsewhere and other shows (both self-reported and tested: they were asked to identify particular characters if they could); familiarity with other metafictional texts (e.g. The Young Ones; texts were not identified as being "metafictional" on the questionnaire, however); and their attitudes toward television viewing (whether they saw it as "a waste of time," anti-intellectual, etc.). The questionnaires were indexed with random numbers to assure confidentiality.

After completing the questionnaire, a group of 19 and group of 18 watched the final episode of St. Elsewhere, "The Fat Lady Sings," some of the content of which is described in the next section. The episode was shown complete with original commercials. No instructions were given as to how the groups were to view the episode, so there was a certain amount of talking about the program as it was being watched, particularly during commercials.

After viewing the episode, the subjects were asked on a second questionnaire to describe what they had seen. They were asked whether or not they liked the show and whether or not they found it difficult to understand. They were asked to identify any puns, references to other media or other TV shows, and other things that struck them as odd. They were also asked to describe what they saw at the end of the episode and then interpret it.

In order to simulate some of the discussion that takes place when television is watched in a small interactive group (as it is usually watched at home), after completing the second questionnaire some subjects were randomly sorted into groups of four or five to discuss the episode. After their discussion, they again described the puns, references, and meanings of the text on a third questionnaire.

The responses to these surveys can be taken in aggregate as a snap shot of a "normative viewer," a median response to the program. Full data is given in Table A1 and A2. Using these norms, the audience selected for this study are described by the following demographics:

- The median age was 22;
- The age range was from 17 to 36;
- The subjects were 38% male, 62% female;
- The subjects reported household ownership of a median of three television sets; 70% reported owning 2-4 sets;
- The subjects reported watching a median of two hours of television a day.

The normative television watching habits of the subjects indicated the type of programs they reported watching most and least often:

- The most commonly cited "favorite" programs were Cheers, L.A. Law, and The Wonder Years;
- The most commonly cited "favorite" movies were The Wizard of Oz and Batman;
- Programs that the normative subject claimed to watch "usually" or "always" were the news (59%), The Cosby Show (52%), "sit-coms" (52%), drama (46%), and re-runs (46%);
- Programs that the normative subject claimed to watch "seldom" or "never" were St. Elsewhere (76%), The Young Ones (73%), It's Garry Shandling's Show (73%), Hill Street Blues (68%), L.A. Law (62%),[2] and thirtysomething (60%).

It was the metafictional programming on the survey, then, that appeared to be the least watched, indicating that the normative viewer had either little familiarity or little love for the style. Full data on preferred programming is given in Table B.

Of the options given to them, then, the subjects seemed to watch metatelevision programming the least of any type (although again, it was not identified as such to them). This programming is, ostensibly, aimed at the type of demographic the subjects represent. Its limited appeal among this group is perhaps due to its overall obscurity in the ratings.

The Text

The final episode of St. Elsewhere, "The Fat Lady Sings," brings the series to a complicated and difficult conclusion as it gives final indulgence to the sort of self-

---

[2] A program listed by some as a favorite was apparently never watched by others.

reflexivity and intertextuality common to the series. What follows is a list of events in the text that struck this researcher as self-reflexive, hopefully presented in a fashion analogous to its matter-of-fact presentation on the show. The reader may find his or her own responses to these elements vary based on familiarity with the item to which they refer. This is not meant to be a comprehensive list; other references may have eluded this researcher and the subjects. The list is divided into the categories intertextuality (i.e., St. Elsewhere referring to other television programs) and self-consciousness (i.e., St. Elsewhere refering to itself as a television program).

Intertextuality

- Departing Dr. Fiscus (Howie Mandel) says to another doctor: "I'm through here. It's the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine."
- Dr. Auschlander (Norman Lloyd), seeing an explosion, says: "Jumpin' Jack! What was that flash?"[3]
- An airplane crashes into the side of the hospital.
- A patient named General Sarnoff is advised to cut down on his television viewing.
- An orderly whose path in the hallway is blocked by equipment advises another orderly to "Move that gurney, Hal."
- Pathologist Dr. Navino (Cindy Pickett) describing an accident fatality records "Patient 4077. Blake, Henry. Cause of death: injury sustained during helicopter crash."
- A young doctor (Bruce Greenwood) tells a patient that "Floyd the hospital barber has been here a long time. He may bury us all."

---

[3] This is actually a recurrent line throughout the entire run of the series.

- A group of departing friends (Sagan Lewis, Howie Mandel, Cindy Pickett, David Morse) engages in a group hug and then stumble as a group over for a box of tissues.

Self-consciousness

- Dr. Morrison (David Morse) is given an "I survived St. Elsewhere hat." The name of the hospital is St. Eligius.
- The new, inept medical resident is named Dr. Brandon Falsey.
- The MTM kitten logo is hooked up to an EKG and proceeds to go code blue and die at the end of the episode.

While this type of self-reflexive hijinks were evident in every episode, they are particularly relied-upon in the conclusion.

The epilogue of the episode presents a particularly challenging textual puzzle, one that was not altogether well received by either the television critics or the show's regular audience. Dr. Auschlander has just died of a stroke. A bearded Dr. Westphall (Ed Flanders) and his autistic son, Tommy (Chad Allen), listen to opera in Auschlander's office as it begins to snow. Tommy looks out the window and watches the snow fall. The hospital is seen from the outside and it begins to shake clumsily up and down in the snow, as if the camera operator were shaking.

Suddenly the scene shifts to a dark and cramped apartment. Norman Lloyd, the actor who plays Auschlander, is sitting in an easy chair reading the paper and Tommy is playing with a glass snow-globe paperweight at his feet. Ed Flanders, who plays Dr. Westphall, enters clean-shaven and wearing a hard-hat and jeans. He calls Norman Lloyd "pop" and asks if Tommy has been behaving. They both comment on how Tommy is wrapped up in his own world, staring at the globe day in and out. Flanders takes the globe and places it on the television set as the three exit the room to eat dinner. The camera dollies in on the

globe to reveal that inside it is a miniature of St. Eligius with snow falling all around it. The frame freezes signifying the end of the episode and the series.

This was the text that the 37 subjects viewed and commented upon. their reactions to it were as diverse as the text is complicated.

Findings

In order to discuss individual reader-responses, it is important to recognize the "normative response" that the subjects gave to this program, calculated using all responses. Full data is attached in Table C.

Among the normative responses to the last episode of St. Elsewhere were:

- 83% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "this show doesn't make sense";
- 72% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I like this show";
- 69% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "this show confused me";
- 64% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I'd like to see more of this show";
- 86% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "this show was too complicated";
- 64% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "I needed to see more episodes";
- 86% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "the whole thing was weird".

This gives a picture of a group of subjects who generally felt comfortable with the level of complexity of the show, who felt they understood it, and who said they liked it.

The normative viewer, then, saw little in the episode that was worthy of their confusion; they didn't detect anything in the text that led them to perceive its postmodern complexity. When asked whether they had seen references to other television shows or movies, the majority reported nothing. The numbers that did detect something unusual were small:

- Only 10% felt that the scene in the pathology lab where patient 4077 was identified as Henry Blake was a reference to M*A*S*H;
- Only 10% felt that the snow-globe was a reference to a movie (Citizen Kane was the most-often cited);
- Only 19% reported hearing dialogue stolen from song lyrics ("Jumpin' Jack! What was that flash?" was the most-often cited);
- Only one in four felt something peculiar was happening at the ending, but they couldn't always articulate what it was.

The significant revelation here is that in matters of intertextuality and self-reflexivity, three in four of the subjects did not report noticing anything that struck them as different from their ordinary diet of programs.

Looking at normative responses alone, however, obscures the subtle and highly differentiated responses that specific audience members made. Subjects with unusual demographic characteristics, for example, often produced unusual responses to the show. Some who seemed to be likely candidates for wide-ranging interpretations of the episode saw nothing challenging or remarkable in it. One 25 year old female subject who reported viewing a considerable amount of metageneric and self-reflexive television programs (e.g. The Young Ones, Saturday Night Live, MTV), a media consumer who might seem likely to find meaning in St. Elsewhere's intertextuality, reported few unusual observations. In spite of her inability to articulate any metafictional messages in the text, she agreed that she liked the episode and disagreed with statements that the episode "didn't make any sense," "confused me," "was too complicated," and "I needed to see more episodes." There were

other subjects similar to her, viewers who watched a lot of television including a lot of sophisticated programming, but saw nothing but more-or-less straight narrative in this episode of St. Elsewhere.

At the other extreme was an 18 year old male subject who reported watching 4 hours of sit-coms and re-runs a day, strongly agreed that he watched a lot of television growing up, and read only 1/2 hour a day. He strongly agreed with the statements "this show didn't make any sense," "this show confused me," and "the whole thing was weird" and strongly disagreed with the statements "I liked this show," "I'd like to see more of this show," and "more TV should be like this." The show seemed to him to refer to General Hospital, and he reported the epilogue as a flashback in which the boy, Tommy, saw what was going to happen in the future.

Intertextuality seemed to present problems for the normative viewer, but individual viewers noticed some of the references. One subject, for example, caught that new resident Brandon Falsey was a reference to the people who make St. Elsewhere (Joshua *Brand and* John *Falsey*). Perhaps most successful at this was a 20 year old male subject who reported ownership of four televisions with four hours watched daily. He was the only subject to report that the "Move that gurney, Hal" line was a reference to Late Night with David Letterman (whose director is Hal Gurney); importantly, the subject reported that Late Night was one of his favorite television programs. This subject was also one of the few to catch the pathology lab "patient #4077, Henry Blake" reference as a reference to the demise of the MacLaine Stevenson character on M*A*S*H; the subjected listed M*A*S*H as another of his favorite programs. Although he reported that he had never seen St. Elsewhere, he accurately reported recognizing William Daniels' (Dr. Craig) voice as the voice of the car KITT on Knight Rider.[4] This subject seemed slightly more familiar with

---

[4] Not an occurrence of meta-television, but the mark of an avid television watcher none-the-less.

the conventions of meta-television than the normative viewer, reporting that he watched The Young Ones a fair amount and Moonlighting and It's Garry Shandling's Show often. The epilogue of the show proved difficult for him, however: he interpreted it as "a flashback of some kind" but said that he had "not a damn clue" as to what it meant.

His difficulty with interpreting the ending of the episode is indicative of most of the comments. In order to compare their analysis of the epilogue, the discussion of it can be separated into three aspects: one, at what time it is meant to be taking place; two, what role the boy, Tommy, plays in it; and three, what it means in the context of the rest of the show.

For those who reported noticing that something peculiar had happened at the end of the show, their interpretations of when it is taking place can be roughly categorized into four types: one, it was a flashback or prequel (as the subject above reported); two, it was a flash forward or a normal forward progression of time; three, it was some other, difficult-to-define time; or four, it was not in the same time frame at all (e.g., it was a world-within-a-world, it was in the child's mind, etc.).

Five subjects felt it was a flashback (including the subject described above). A 27 year old male viewer who reports watching 1 hour of television and often watching St. Elsewhere felt that the epilogue was a reference to when the hospital was first built and Dr. Auschlander came in to take charge of it. A 20 year old male subject who had never watched St. Elsewhere but watches 3 hours of television a day felt that it only flashed back a few years, to when Tommy was younger and Dr. Westphall had not yet left the hospital. Others reported similar interpretations.

Two subjects saw the epilogue as a forward progression of time. A 17 year old female viewer who reports watching 2 hours of television daily with no experience watching St. Elsewhere felt that Dr. Westphall and Tommy had just gone home; this subject apparently did not interpret the character played by Norman Lloyd to be in any way related to Dr. Auschlander. A 21 year old female subject who had only watched "one or

two" episodes previously felt that the actors were playing their usual characters, but that somehow Auschlander hadn't really died. She felt the scene was taking place the next day.

One subject felt that she was watching some sort of parallel time, stating "I got the impression that the two scenes were opposite: in one they are without Auschlander looking out, in the other they are with Auschlander looking in." She is referring to Tommy looking out the window of the hospital prior to the epilogue, then Tommy looking into the glass globe during the epilogue. This subject was a 21 year old female who watches three hours of television daily, watched a moderate amount of St. Elsewhere, and lists L.A. Law, thirtysomething and China Beach as her favorite shows. Several subjects described the epilogue as a reference to Tommy's inner world and hence not in the same time frame as the rest of the series.

The role that Tommy played in the series was also subject to varying interpretations. The idea that what had transpired prior to the epilogue was happening in Tommy's mind was the most common interpretation. "Maybe Saint Elsewhere . . . was all in the child's mind" reported a 24 year old male who watches 4 hours of television daily but seldom watched St. Elsewhere. "The story wasn't real -- neither was the hospital; (they were) all the imagination of the autistic boy," reported a 19 year old female who watches 5 hours of television a day including watching St. Elsewhere "often." A 24 year old male who watches 2 hours of television a day and reports "always" watching St. Elsewhere said that Tommy really was

> "the autistic son of a construction worker (who) looked at the snow globe all day and imagined the story of Saint Elsewhere. The last shot was like Citizen Kane, when Welles dies and the snowscape falls out of his hand. They don't say if the boy will play with the snowscape again. It should have been dropped and broken."

A group of five subjects discussing the show felt that there was a connection between the character being named Tommy and the title character of The Who's rock opera Tommy about a self-obsessed and self-inclosed "deaf, dumb and blind kid."

As to what the epilogue meant, interpretations were sparse but invariably unique. Perhaps to resist the discontinuity that the epilogue presented in the context of the rest of the show, one 36 year old female who reported often watching St. Elsewhere felt that it was metaphorical: Dr. Westphall always regarded Dr. Auschlander as a father figure, so here they became father and son (this implies that she interpreted the rest of the series, not the epilogue, to be what was "really happening"; it was the epilogue and not the series that took place in someone's mind). A 22 year old female who claimed to watch 5 to 10 hours of television a day and reported watching St. Elsewhere "often" said

> "the ending means that the memories and ups and downs faced by the people at St. Eligius and possibly mankind are 'bottled up' like the water and snow in the glass bubble and saved forever somehow."

Her use of the term "St. Eligius" points to more than a passing familiarity with the show. A 22 year old female who watches 4-6 hours of television a day but never watched St. Elsewhere said that placing the snow globe on the television set at the ending was analogous to the NBC television network placing the show "on the shelf."

Perhaps the most sophisticated interpretation of the epilogue was reported by a 24 year old female who watches 1 1/2 hours of television a day but, unlike most of the other subjects, reports that she reads books more than she watches television (by a two to one margin). Her taste in favorite television shows and movies was also distinct from the normative response: she prefered the Discovery Channel and My Life as a Dog to the normative favorites Cheers and The Wizard of Oz, implying an affinity for what is conventionally thought of as "higher brow" media.[5] She stated that the epilogue was about

---

Ed Flanders (the actor) at some point in the future remembering when St. Elsewhere was still on the air; the shot of the snow-globe with St. Eligius in it was for her analogous to a television set itself. For this subject, the characters in the epilogue are metaphors for loyal viewers of St. Elsewhere watching the final episode.

Many of the intertextualities and self-reflections of "The Fat Lady Sings" went unnoticed by the subjects. The "I survived St. Elsewhere" hat struck no one as unusual. The parallel between the group hug and shuffle for a tissue and the final episode of The Mary Tyler Moore show was not mentioned. The same is true of the reference to General Sarnoff or the character and pun borrowed from The Andy Griffith Show in the line "Floyd the hospital barber has been here a long time. He *may bury* us all." A full description of how the metafictional elements were read is given in Table D. The ability to decode a text as densely postmodern as "The Fat Lady Sings" is based on a complicated and deeply personal pattern of beliefs, reading habits, and television viewing. It could be argued that no two viewers saw the same St. Elsewhere.

Autism: A New Model?

The interpretation of the epilogue as homologous to the act of viewing the final episode of the show is a sophisticated one, one that recognizes the process of metacommunication as it functions. Although when doing reader-response criticism it is inappropriate and invalid to point to one interpretation as the correct one,[6] this interpretation

---

5 "High-" and "Low-brow" are problematic terms used here only in reference to their popular perception, not as an endorsement of their implicit assumptions about education and taste.

6 To do so would actually invalidate the value of doing reader-response criticism in ht first place; it is the diversity of responses that is sought, not the "accuracy," which would represent a throw-back to criticism before Frye.

is a persuasive one and does serve to evoke the need for a broader model of media reception.

If one were to follow the homology interpretation to its logical conclusion, the metaphor that is implied for the media audience is a startling one. The varied and personal responses the viewers showed to this episode of St. Elsewhere suggest that, in a sense, each of them was watching it from their own perspective, their own world, a world which they could not easily communicate with other viewers. In essence, the final episode of St. Elsewhere suggests that the media audience is constituted of viewers metaphorically similar to a pivotal character's emotional condition: autism.

Such a model for media reception has theoretical precedent. Michel de Certeau (1984) has already used the term "autism" to apply to reading. He states that

> as unrecognized producers, poets of their own acts, silent discoverers of their own paths in the jungle of functionalist rationality, consumers produce through their signifying practices something that might be considered similar to the "wandering lines" drawn by autistic children: "indirect" or "errant" trajectories obeying their own logic (p. xviii).

What is the source of those trajectories? The social and media conditioning experienced by each member of the media audience. Jenkins' study of reader responses to Star Trek (1988), also based on the work of de Certeau, similarly shows how readers rewrite or "poach" personally significant meaning from television texts.

Tommy's autism, described in the epilogue as "everyday, a world of his own," is a useful metaphor for reception that concedes aspects of the hypodermic needle, reading television, and hyperreality. The fashion in which Tommy looks into the toy and the world in the globe he creates there, a world constituted and made coherent in his imagination, is analogous to the diversity of ways that television is viewed. The meaning of television (and if one subscribes to Derrida's grammatology [1976], all communication) is ultimately

constituted in the act of reception, a process that makes it necessarily personal and inaccessible, just as the thoughts in Tommy's head are inaccessible.

Many of the subjects found it difficult not only to understand "The Fat Lady Sings," but also to describe what they had seen on the screen, let alone interpret it. Familiarity with previous episodes of St. Elsewhere may or may not have been a boost, depending on an infinite number of influences, Klapper's multistep flow of meaning (1960), into the subject. Familiarity with other postmodern television shows may or may not have given the subjects the eyes with which to read metafiction on St. Elsewhere.

Conclusion

There exists a homology between what "The Fat Lady Sings" is and the way it is watched, reminiscent of the "homology hypothesis" proposed by Brummett (1988) in the context of pornography being viewed on the VCR. Brummet asserted that VCR viewing of pornography allows the viewer to control and commodify the film's content in a manner analogous to the archetypal male treatment of females in a pornographic text. Similarly, viewing St. Elsewhere produces in the viewer an entirely subjective response analogous to Tommy's autism.

Clearly, the use of merely normative data is not indicative of the breadth and depth of responses readers are apt to have to a text. The use of purely normative data should be used by television programmers, and then only advisedly; students of television criticism should use it only in contrast to the specific reader-responses of single viewers. The normative response did not imply an autistic response by the audience; every individual response to the show did.

In its final moments, St. Elsewhere seemed to reject the idea that the St. Eligius was controlled by patients, doctors or junkies; at the same time, it was interpreted to be rejecting the notion that the meaning of television is controlled by passive viewers, readers,

or hyperrealists. The only meaning in St. Eligius and St. Elsewhere was the subjective meaning given to it by an autistic observer. Not every television watcher is a "patient," a "physician," or even a "junkie," although a great deal of reader-response criticism treats them as such.

This study is far from conclusive on the manner in which St. Elsewhere can be read or on the use of actual reader-responses to the process of reader-response criticism. Further methodological testing of the Reception Theory hypothesis is required, including larger samples and more accurately cross-referenced demographic data on television viewing patterns, personal beliefs, and the kinds of responses they elicit. This study is at best an indication of the kind of hypothesis-testing that can be done and the sort of results it might elicit. The most accurate and interesting conclusions will no doubt be generated from researchers more familiar with research methodology and less familiar with literary criticism.

Perhaps every program will generate interpretations that indicate that viewing is homologous to the program itself (just as every text to some extent invents its own language), a discovery that would imply that form, content, and reception are as inseparable as theorists such as Derrida imply. Whether or not that proves to be the case, it is clear that the viewers of St. Elsewhere approach it the way Tommy does: autistically. This program is received in a unique way by every viewer, a process of reception that they find difficult, even impossible, to articulate.

Table A1

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA: AGE, GENDER, TV VIEWING

AGE	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	
	3%	3%	11%	5%	24%	24%	3%	
AGE	24	25	26	27	28	plus	N/A	
	11%	3%	3%	3%	3%	3%	3%	100%

GENDER	Male	Female
	38%	62%

# TV SETS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
	19%	24%	32%	14%	5%	3%	3%	100%

DAILY HRS	less than	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	more than
of TV	3%	14%	35%	19%	11%	16%	0%	0%	3%
of Radio	8%	22%	35%	16%	0%	8%	3%	0%	8%
of Read	19%	38%	24%	3%	11%	3%	0%	0%	3%

Table A2

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA: TV WATCHING

	SD	D	N	A	SA
I watch a lot of television	16%	32%	24%	22%	5%
My parents watch a lot of TV	5%	16%	22%	41%	16%
Don't watch too much TV	5%	16%	27%	41%	11%
There are good shows on TV	0%	3%	24%	68%	5%
I watch too much TV	19%	54%	16%	8%	3%
My parents think I watch too much TV	16%	51%	19%	11%	0%
TV is a waste of time	19%	46%	30%	5%	0%
I am pretty smart	0%	0%	24%	59%	16%
I understand what I see on TV	0%	0%	19%	70%	11%
I read a lot	3%	32%	24%	22%	19%
Movies are a waste of time	35%	59%	3%	0%	3%
I read too much	38%	46%	5%	8%	3%
My parents read a lot	5%	22%	24%	38%	11%
I watched a lot of TV growing up	5%	3%	14%	46%	32%

Table B

PROGRAM VIEWING

I WATCH	never	seldom	middling	often	always
Letterman	8%	46%	19%	24%	3%
Moonlighting	14%	43%	19%	22%	3%
Cagney	49%	35%	5%	11%	0%
Cosby	8%	24%	16%	41%	11%
Cable movie	16%	24%	27%	30%	3%
St. Elsewhere	49%	27%	5%	16%	3%
Til head hurts	65%	30%	3%	3%	0%
more than anyone	57%	30%	8%	5%	0%
re-runs	0%	22%	32%	35%	11%
sports	16%	41%	24%	8%	11%
news	0%	19%	22%	51%	8%
LA Law	38%	24%	11%	16%	11%
thirtysome	38%	22%	14%	16%	11%
Hill Street Blues	49%	19%	8%	22%	3%
Three's Company	8%	38%	14%	35%	5%
sit-coms	0%	19%	30%	41%	11%
drama	3%	16%	35%	43%	3%
I understand what I see	0%	3%	19%	54%	24%
Young Ones	57%	16%	8%	11%	8%
Garry Shandling	43%	30%	11%	8%	8%

Table C

RESPONSES TO TEXT

	SD	D	N	A	SA	N/A
The show didn't make sense	19%	64%	11%	0%	3%	3%
I liked this show	3%	3%	22%	53%	19%	0%
This show confused me	8%	61%	14%	14%	3%	0%
I'd like to see more of this show	3%	8%	25%	53%	11%	0%
This show was too complicated	19%	67%	8%	6%	0%	0%
I needed to see more episodes	3%	61%	11%	25%	0%	0%
More TV should be like this	3%	11%	42%	31%	14%	0%
The whole thing was weird	8%	78%	3%	8%	3%	0%
This seemed like the real world	8%	19%	31%	33%	6%	3%
I wish I could be more like these characters	11%	36%	33%	19%	0%	0%

Table D

READING METATELEVISION: READER RESP

INTERTEXTUALITY	
MTM Tissue	0.0%
Snow-globe	8.1%
M*A*S*H	10.8%
Heidi (?)	2.7%
Other	2.7%
PUNS, ETC.	
Operatic fat lady sings	32.4%
Song lyrics	18.9%
Hal Gurney	2.7%
'Leave, Erickson' to Viking	27.0%
Other	0.0%
SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS	
"Tommy" = The Who	2.7%
Autism	10.8%
World in globe	21.6%
TIME:	
Sequel	2.7%
Prequel	13.5%
"Other" time	2.7%
? Time	8.1%
Brandon Falsey	2.7%
Globe = TV	2.7%
Other	5.4%
OTHER EXPLANATIONS	
Only fans will understand	2.7%

Works Cited

Ang, I. (1985). Watching Dallas: Soap opera and the melodramatic imagination. New York: Methuen.

Barker, (1989). "St. Elsewhere: The power of history." Wide Angle, 11 (1): 32-47.

Baudrillard, J. (1983). Simulations. New York: Semiotext(e), Inc.

Brummet, B. (1988). "The homology hypothesis: Pornography on the VCR." Critical Studies in Mass Communication, 5: 202-216.

De Certeau, M. (1984). The practice of everyday life. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Derrida, J. (1976). Of grammatology. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Fiske, J. and Hartley, J. (1978). Reading television. London: Methuen.

Frye, N. (1971). Anatomy of criticism. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Gadamer, H. (1986). Truth and method. New York: Crossroad.

Iser, W. (1980). The act of reading: A theory of aesthetic response. Baltimore, MD.: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Jauss, H. (1982). Toward an aesthetic of reception. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.

Jenkins, H. (1988). "Star Trek rerun, reread, rewritten: Fan writing as textual poaching." Critical Studies in Mass Communication, 5: 85-107.

Katz, E. and Lazarsfeld, P. (1954). Personal influence: The part played by people in the flow of mass communication. Glencoe, Il.: The Free Press.

Klapper, J. (1960). The effects of mass communication. Glencoe, Il.: The Free Press.

Lasswell, H. (1927). Propaganda technique in the world war. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Meyrowitz, J. (1985). No sense of place: The impact of electronic media on social behavior. New York: Oxford.

Olson, S. (1987). "Metatelevision: Popular postmodernism." Critical Studies in Mass Communication, 4: 284-300.

Yurick, S. (1985). Metatron. New York: Semiotext(e), Inc.

Primary Text

"The Fat Lady Sings." St. Elsewhere (NBC Television Network)
MTM Productions.

Teleplay by Bruce Paltrow and Mark Tinker from a story by Tom Fontana, John Tinker, and Channing Gibson.

Directed by Mark Tinker.

Produced by John Tinker and Channing Gibson.